

# **UNDERSTANDING QUEER THEORY IN INDONESIAN POPULAR CULTURE: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES**

**Maimunah**

Department of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Airlangga  
University, Surabaya, Indonesia

*Email* :maymunir@yahoo.com / maimunah.munir@gmail.com

## **Abstraks**

Artikel ini membahas tentang kemunculan istilah “queer” dalam konteks budaya barat dan non barat. Dengan mengeksplorasi sejarah yang memunculkan istilah tersebut, analisis berpusat pada perkembangan queer sebagai reformulasi identitas politik gay dan lesbian dan sebagai kerangka konseptual baru untuk analisis kultural. Dari eksplorasi terhadap representasi karakter queer dalam film Asia dan penggunaan teori film queer oleh ilmuwan film Asia, pembahasan dalam artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa teori queer menolak pemahaman yang monolitik dan universal tentang seksualitas manusia. Teori queer lebih terbuka pada eksplorasi kekhususan budaya dan keanekaragaman.

*Kata kunci: Teori queer, kajian film, Indonesia*

## **Introduction**

### **The Origins and Development of Queer Studies**

The term “queer” and the notion of “queer studies” have a relatively recent, and specific, history. In its contemporary meaning, the use of the

term marks a new stage in the movement for civil and political rights by people of non-normative sexualities that began to emerge in the early 1990s. However, in the broad history of homosexual subcultures in the West, “queer” has a much older etymology.

In the 1910s and 1920s, the term “queer” was used in the U.S. to differentiate between “normal” men and those who felt “different”. As a term, “queer” was relatively neutral and did not carry the derogatory connotations of words like “faggot” and “fairy”. One characteristic of men who identified themselves as queer was their “unmanly ways” (Chauncey, 1994: 101), but in this era, recognition as queer was a source of pride, since it marked out these men as special, and more sophisticated than other men. However in the 1930s, the term “gay”, especially in “gay bars”, became popular. Its use was further consolidated during World War II (Chauncey, 1994: 19).<sup>1</sup> Gradually, “gay” came to replace “queer”, and the meaning of the latter term began to change. Some younger men who identified themselves as gay regarded the older term as pejorative and abusive since the “queerness” of the older generation was seen as suggesting “gender deviance” (Chauncey, 1994: 19).

In the late twentieth century, the usage of “gay” took on political connotations in the context of increasing demands for civil rights for homosexuals, especially after the so-called Stonewall Riots that occurred in New York City on 27 June 1969 after a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a

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<sup>1</sup> In 1933, Noel Ersine’s *Dictionary of Underworld Slang* defined the term “gay” in its first usage as “a homosexual boy”. In 1955, an English journalist, Peter Wildblood, defined the term as “an American euphemism for homosexual” (Dynes, 1990: 456).

New York gay and drag bar. The date continues to be commemorated internationally, and particularly in the U.S., as Stonewall Day, a symbol of the formation of lesbian and gay identities as a political force to challenge the dominant culture. The aim was to evoke a new consciousness of the realities of same-sex relationships, under the banner of a new movement called Gay Liberation, led mainly by white, middle-class and well educated men (Altman, 1972: 171).

As it evolved at this time, Gay Liberation was part of a much wider movement that included black, radical youth and women's activists. Ethnic minorities protested against American racism, youth criticised the Vietnam War and women's activists denounced the "sexism" and "heterosexual chauvinism" of mainstream American culture (Altman, 1972: 75).<sup>1</sup> The Stonewall Riots were also supported by other sexually marginal groups such as bisexuals, drag queens, transvestites and transsexuals, even though they were relatively small in number. All these minorities claimed to be struggling against oppression, and it became "almost a competition as to which group [could] identify itself as the most oppressed" (Altman, 1972: 113-114).

Gay liberationists supported other sexual minorities because they aimed to gain acceptance for a broader understanding of human sexuality. In the spirit of gay liberation, many gay and lesbian activists rejected the term

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<sup>1</sup> The prominent feminist, Betty Friedan, claimed that the Stonewall Riots were inspired by "women's liberation", which was formed in 1967, two years before the riots took place (Dynes, 1990: 727). She criticised militant lesbians as "a lavender menace" which potentially threatened the feminist movement (Jagose, 1996: 45; Turner, 2000: 14).

“homosexual” because it was associated with the medical and legal establishment, while the term “queer” was still considered as epithet like “faggot” or “dyke” (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004a: 5, 2004b: 329). As such, it is understandable that Stonewall itself is considered by many gay activists as a symbol of “gay”, not “queer”, identity (Dyer, 2002: 4).

The contemporary emergence of “queer” must be placed in the social and political context of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. The fact that AIDS, as a new disease, was first diagnosed among male homosexuals was problematic for the gay movement, as it contributed to the stigmatisation of gay identity. Dennis Altman (1989: 44) asserts that the development of gay organisations, concerned with providing education, support services and counselling related to AIDS, were faced with the challenge of reformulating gay identity. On one side, the struggle against AIDS and its social and political impact strengthened the existence of gay communities in the Western world. The production of cultural images (films, novels, art works) that defined on meaning of the epidemic was one manifestation of this new sense of community.

However, on the other side, this campaign unintentionally reinforced the stigmatisation of AIDS as a specifically gay disease. This in turn led to the emergence of political homophobia, and strengthened the calls for a return to normative sexual orientation. The coalition which formed between gay, lesbian, bisexuals and transgendered activists to fight the AIDS crisis and its political consequences subsequently became an embryo of the use of the term “queer”, a defiant assertion of difference, but also of inclusivity. The new coalition, formed in 1990, labelled itself as Queer Nation to

designate a “community of difference inclusive of a broad variety of sexual identities and behaviours” (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004a: 5).

While queer activists were campaigning in the streets, some female queer scholars began to conceptualise the notion of queer theory. The rapid progress and consolidation of lesbian and gay studies in the 1990s opened the way to the increasing deployment of the term “queer” in theoretical and conceptual analysis. The concept of Queer Theory was first used by the feminist film theorist, Theresa de Laurentis, in her introduction to a special issue on Queer in the journal *Differences* in 1991 (Driscoll, 1996: 23).<sup>1</sup> She identified the possibility that queer theory might act as a synthesis between feminism and gay/lesbian studies (Beasley, 2005: 164; Probyn, 2005: 288; Turner, 2000: 5). Laurentis’ idea marked the beginning of the use of the term “queer” in broader academic circles.

Subsequently, a number of specific lesbian and gay studies journals, as well as other periodicals, published special issues on queer theory. In Australia, a specialist journal devoted to queer studies, *Critical InQueeries*, began publishing in 1995.<sup>2</sup> Non specialist publications such as *Sociological*

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<sup>1</sup> In her article entitled “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities”, Laurentis (cited in Driscoll, 1996: 32) stated that queer theory focused firstly, “on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and secondly, on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences”. In her view, queer theory would cover the production of sexuality and the construction of the silencing that shaped it (Driscoll, 1996: 32). The fact that “queer theory” was used firstly by Laurentis, a feminist, means it is necessary to understand the intersection between feminism and queer theory in general (Turner, 2000: 5).

<sup>2</sup> In their introduction, the editors, Steven Angelides and Craig Bird, stated that the journal had two specific aims, “to problematise static and pregiven identity concepts and axes of identification in order to incite border dialogues, to encourage boundary

*Theory* (Summer, 1994), *Socialist Review* (vol 22, no 1, 1992), and *Social Text* (vol 9, no. 4, 1991) all devoted space to discussions of the concept and application of queer theory. *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* published two editions on queer in 1991 and 1994. *Media Information Australia* (1995) and *Meanjin* (1996) also published special issues on queer theory and studies (Jagose, 1996: 2-3).

The word “queer” appeared in the title of the fourth national lesbian and gay studies conference at Yale University’s Lesbian and Gay Studies Centre in 1994, “*InQueery in Theory Indeed*”. Three of the most basic queer theory texts, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Diana Fuss’s anthology, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (1991), also appeared in the early 1990s (Garber, 2001: 183). This indicates that in the early stage of the formulation of queer theory, feminist figures played an important role. Queer theory became closely linked to the humanities, finding a home in academic departments of literature, history, film, literary, cultural studies and philosophy (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004a: 5; Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 1; Spargo, 1999: 41).

In the early 1990s, post-modernism/post-structural theory began to dominate Western academic discourse in the humanities and social sciences, gradually displacing the influence of modernist and structuralist theories. Queer theory, which is derived from the post-structuralist approach, not only criticised the notion of stable and fixed identities that was central to gay and lesbian studies, but also the strict dichotomisation between heterosexuality

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crossings, and to engage discussions of fluidity and interimplication in relation to identity categories” (1995: 4).

and homosexuality. In place of this binary opposition, queer scholars asserted that these two categories of sexual identity were not in fact opposites, but complements of each other. They argued that queer was not opposed to heterosexuality, but to heteronormativity, the social norm that was responsible for sexual inequality and the domination of heterosexuality over homosexuality (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 2-3). By shifting its focus away from the notion of sexual identity defined according to binary opposites, queer “exemplifies a more mediated relation to categories of identification” (Jagose, 1996: 77).

It can be said, then, that queer studies emerged partly as a reaction against the gay and lesbian studies approach. By using post-modernism/post-structural theory, queer scholars argued that lesbian and gay identities were temporary and conditional rather than fixed and coherent. For instance, Judith Butler (1990: 33) in her most widely-cited book *Gender Trouble* asserted that identity is performative. Basing her argument on Foucault’s idea of the contested relations between sexuality, language and power, Butler argued that rather than “an essence that defines the individual, identities are the effect of the repeated performance of certain cultural signs and conventions”. This understanding of how identity is formed “radically deconstructed the humanist project underlying gay and lesbian studies” (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 4). As Butler asserted, this re-formulation of the notion of identity meant that “heterosexuality is no longer assumed to be the original of which homosexuality is an inferior copy” (Jagose, 1996: 85).

## Criticism and Controversy

The problematic relationship between queer theory and lesbian and gay studies is indicative of the paradigm shift that has taken place in the study of sexualities. At this stage, the shift is incomplete, and a degree of flexibility, and also controversy, is still found in what has come to be called the domain of queer studies. Tamsin Spargo (1999: 41) points out that some queer critics adopt and use both terms, since each of them may be strategically appropriate in different contexts. Some writers view queer theory as having a greater possibility in the institutional realm than in the political context, where both terms originated (Jagose, 1996: 110). Others, however, resist the use of queer altogether, believing that it is somehow encouraging people to dismiss the positive aspects of gay and lesbian theory. One widespread view is that queer has now subsumed the notion of gay and lesbian theory. From this perspective, queer theory is a useful umbrella framework for all studies of non-normative sexuality and its cultural products. As Elspeth Probyn (2005: 288) explains:

“Queer was to be an umbrella term for all those outside of heterosexuality, as well as a way of specifying multiple identities. People inhabit many identities simultaneously, and it was argued that queer would provide an alternative to the “add-on” model of naming identity categories: black, lesbian, working class etc.”

The gradual shift from lesbian and gay studies to the concept of “queer studies” was signalled by the publication of *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* in 1993. The editors, Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David Halperin, stated in their introduction that while they acknowledged their affinity for the term “queer studies”, they decided to use



the term “lesbian and gay” in the title of the anthology because it was “more widely preferred”:

“It was difficult to decide what to title this anthology. We have reluctantly chosen not to speak here and in our title of “queer studies”, despite our own attachment to the term, because we wish to acknowledge the force of current usage [...] Moreover, the names “lesbian” and “gay” are probably more widely preferred than is the name “queer”. And the names “lesbian” and “gay” are not assimilationist [...] So, our choice of “lesbian/gay” indicates no wish on our part to make lesbian/gay studies look less assertive, less unsettling, and less queer than it already does.” (1993: vxii).

This anthology, which came to be seen as the founding text of queer theory, includes work by a range of writers, including contemporary queer theorists as well as lesbian and gay critics. Two-thirds of the essays in the book are related to the establishment of queer theory, illustrating its gradual evolution out of gay/lesbian studies model.

The development of queer theory led to a heated debate, sparked by the reactions of some feminist scholars to its perceived gender neutrality. Unlike the terms “gay” and “lesbian” which clearly designate gender specific identities, “queer” is relatively gender neutral, a characteristic which contributed to the term’s initial acceptance and popularity (Walters, 2005: 13). However in the eyes of some feminist theorists, the idea of gender neutrality was naïve and absurd, and potentially encouraged the masculine bias.<sup>1</sup> Some saw the rise of queer theory as the work of white male and middle class academics, which has led to a continuing marginalisation of lesbian feminism in the academy. They were concerned that queer theory’s

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters, for instance, asserted “feminism has taught us that the idea of gender neutrality is not only fictitious but also a move of gender domination” (2005: 15).

emphasis on sexuality rather than gender potentially undermined the interests of feminism or could even be seen as “anti-feminist” (McLaughlin, Casey, and Richardson, 2006: 6). By contrast, queer scholars argued that it was almost impossible to find any queer issues that were dealt with adequately in feminism (Weed, 1997: xii, fn. 1). The dispute between feminists and queer scholars is now viewed as “inappropriate” and “unhealthy” (McLaughlin, Casey, and Richardson, 2006: 6).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it explains why not all young lesbians call themselves “queer”, and why almost all older feminist scholars and activists prefer to identify themselves as “lesbian-feminists”.

Despite these controversies, queer theory has continued to develop, while preserving its original character as a non-normative discipline. This means that there are many definitions of queer theory, which sometimes contradict each other. Benschhoff and Griffin, for instance, define queer as “a theory that rejects essentialist or biological notions of gender and sexuality, and sees them instead as fluid and socially constructed positionalities” (2004a: 1). David Halperin asserts that queer is “an identity without an essence”, stating that “*there is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*” (Halperin, 1995: 62, original emphasis). However, since queer does not refer to a particular identity, it is “available to anyone who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices”. Tamsin Spargo (1999:

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<sup>1</sup> Janice McLaughlin, Mark E. Casey and Diane Richardson argued that there are many feminists and/or queer theorists who are “in between” and cannot be categorised in the dispute between feminist versus queer. Although the dispute can be seen as illustrating the process of development of a theory, these writers suggest that it would be better to find together “new ways of engaging with the issue” (2006: 3).

40) describes queer as “perpetually at odds with the normal, the norm, whether that is dominant heterosexuality or gay/lesbian identity. It is definitely eccentric and ab-normal”, while Chris Beasley identifies queer as “invok[ing] a rebellious sexual identity but not a gender identity” (2005: 167). This range of definitions indicates that queer studies as a new way of thinking attempts to cover a wide range of problems and controversies in the interrelation between sexuality, desire and gender. As a dynamic field of knowledge, it represents a “zone of possibilities” which resists earlier understandings of sexes and genders as stable entities.

Bearing in mind the debates and controversy which surround the term, I will use “queer” in the following discussion to refer to all forms and representations of non-normative sexuality, including those that are identifiably “gay” or “lesbian”. In this sense, I use “queer” as an umbrella term, and do not enter into the debate between queer theory and lesbian and gay theory, or the debate between queer theory and feminism. However, there is another, and separate, area of controversy with which the following discussion must engage, and that is the question of whether the use of queer theory is appropriate in the analysis of non-Western cultural contexts. Existing studies suggest that this is a highly problematic area, which raises the important question of historical and cultural specificity and difference.

## **Discussion**

### **Queer in Indonesian Cultural Context**

In Indonesia, this “local negotiation” of the concept of queer has necessarily involved a prior recognition of a variety of long-established indigenous forms of same-sex behaviour and transgenderism. Unlike the

terms *gay*, *lesbi/lesbian* and *homoseksual*, which only became well known with the growing discussion of sexual diversity and HIV/AIDS prevention programs in the mid 1980s (Oetomo, 2000: 48), Indonesian languages contain words to describe indigenous forms of homosexuality and the transgendered behaviour that is a familiar part of the religious rituals of many Indonesian societies. Tom Boellstorff argues that the subject positions defined by these indigenous embodiments of homosexuality and transgenderism cannot be equated with the Western understandings of “sexual identities”.

He describes them rather as “ethnolocalized homosexual and transvestite professional” subject positions (ETPs). In doing so, he is drawing attention to the distinction between behaviour and identity, and stressing the link between transgendered and homosexual behaviour and profession in a range of traditional Indonesian societies. Examples of what he defines as ETPs are the *gemblak-warok* partnerships involved in the *reog* drama rituals in Ponorogo, East Java, and the male to female transgendered priests, or *bissu*, that occupy a central place in the religious rites and rituals of South Sulawesi courts and communities (Boellstorff, 2005a: 9; Graham, 2004: 108).

In addition to ETPs, Boellstorff also defines two further categories of Indonesian (and to a large extent Southeast Asian), non-normative sexual and gendered subject positions. The first category is that of the male transvestite subject position now known in Indonesia as *waria*, which appeared in written discourse in descriptions of a Batavian (Jakartan) dance performance named *Bantji Batavia* in the 1830s, and came into more frequent use in urban centres in the mid nineteenth-century (Boellstorff,

2005a: 57, 2007: 85). In contemporary Indonesian, *waria* is a euphemistic term that derives from the abbreviation of *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man).<sup>1</sup> Unlike *kathoe* in Thailand, Boellstorff argues that most *waria* never define themselves as a third gender but as “men with women’s souls” (2005a: 57).

By contrast, Dédé Oetomo asserts that most *waria* do perceive themselves as a third gender since they incorporate both maleness and femaleness. They feel themselves to be “women trapped in men’s bodies” (Oetomo, 1996: 261, 2000: 54). Despite these different perspectives on the applicability of the “third gender” terminology, it is clear that *waria* is not a sexual identity but a gender identity. As Oetomo (2000: 48) observes, “the category of *banci/waria* does not, for the general public, necessarily connote sexual orientation. It is rather a label for non-confirming gender behaviour or for a gender identity”.

Boellstorff’s last category of Indonesian non-normative sexual and gendered subject positions is that of *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities. Despite the fact that these terms derive from the West, the subject positions they define do not simply mimic the sexual identities invoked by their Western equivalents. Interestingly, however, *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are not totally distinct from *gay* and lesbian Westerners. The “sameness” and the “difference” which the Indonesian terms embody reflect a negotiation between local and global cultures. One striking difference between *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians and their Western *gay* and lesbian counterparts is the Indonesians’ perception that heterosexual marriage is a key step in becoming a whole person. Heterosexual marriage and having children are viewed as

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<sup>1</sup> *Waria* has many local language equivalents, such as *bandhu* (Madurese), *bentji* (Balinese), *khuntsa* (Arabic), as well as popular slang terms *banci* and *bencong*.

“part of a complete *gay* or *lesbi* life” (Boellstorff, 2005a: 110). This compromise reflects the influence of “compulsory heterosexuality” in the Indonesian cultural context. In Boellstorff’s view, heterosexual marriage is also a strategy on the part of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians for maintaining their place in national culture, an indication that “*gay and lesbi understand their social worlds in national rather than simply global terms*” (Boellstorff, 2005a: 7, original emphasis).

Female same-sex oriented individuals and transgendered subject positions in Indonesia exist outside the indigenous ritual contexts that Boellstorff and others have described in the case of males. The terminology used to describe these orientations and positions is appropriated from elsewhere, as the Javanese description of masculine lesbian women as *butchie*, in addition to the Javanese term *sentul*, and the Javanese and West Sumatran appropriation of “tomboy” as *tomboi* serve to illustrate. However this appropriation also involves a process of negotiation and transformation, seen in the local understanding of *tomboi* as “a female acting in the manner of men (*gaya laki-laki*)” who perceives her feelings to be that of a man (Blackwood, 1998: 491, 496).

Similarly, Boellstorff (2007: 204) reports that some *tomboi* perceive their gender status as “masculine women, others as men with women’s bodies or women with men’s souls”. In these definitions, *tomboi* emerges as a gendered complement to the male transvestite or *waria*. Both are primarily understood as gendered subject positions, not sexualities. Both define a form

of same-sex desire defined in terms of difference, not sameness, as is the case with the Western understanding of “lesbian”<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, as Boellstorff goes on to point out, *tomboi* has a distinctly different history from *waria* and its earlier equivalents, which in some senses places it closer to the *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions. The *tomboi* and her feminine partner came to be known in Indonesia only at the same time as the *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions became current, meaning that the history of *tomboi* and *lesbi* to some extent are parallel narratives, each defining a different form of female same-sex subjectivity. Following Blackwood (1998: 508) and Murray (2001: 174), Boellstorff (2007: 207-208) locates the distinction primarily in class terms. *Lesbi* subjectivities tend to be associated with wealthier and more highly educated social classes and the consequent “modern” outlooks. More inclined to be influenced by feminism, *lesbi* individuals may explicitly reject the *tomboi*/femme dichotomy, while the *tomboi* and her feminine partner often dissociate themselves from the perceived “lesbian” obsession with sex.

As these examples illustrate, the imposition of Western categories becomes highly problematic without a detailed understanding of the way gender and sexuality are conceived in other cultures and contexts. In the case of queer theory and queer discourse in general, it is important to recognise that in Indonesia, and Southeast Asia more generally, the queer focus on non-normative sexual identities must be broadened to incorporate the

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Blackwood illustrates this distinction by reference to personal experience. She describes her own perception that her relationship with her *tomboi* partner, Dayan, is the expression of a “sexual identity (a desire for other women)”, while Dayan, for her part expresses a primary attraction to Blackwood’s female gender behaviour and her capacity to uphold femininity (1998: 496).

interplay between sexuality and gender which local language terminology defines and which shapes the local interpretations of imported understandings of same-sex desire. In Indonesia, the emergence of self-defined “queer communities” and the growth of an Indonesian queer discourse imply that queer is emerging as a valid and local frame of reference. Equally, however, queer theory, or queer studies, needs to acquire a culturally appropriate and local identity in Indonesia. The following discussion aims to contribute to that development, by taking the fundamental insights of queer theory as it has evolved in the West, but attempting to apply them in the specific context of contemporary Indonesia. In other words, it proposes a historically and culturally contingent interpretation of the concept of queer, referred to here as “Indonesian queer”.

### **Queer in Indonesian Popular Culture**

One area which has proved particularly receptive to the application of queer theory, both in Western and non-Western contexts, has been film studies. As with the history of queer theory in general, the origins of queer film studies lie in the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. It was at this time that a number of film historians began to construct a history of Western film, particularly American film, highlighting the changing depictions of characters and themes that could be labelled “queer” according to the emerging definitions of the term.

In comparison to India, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, the Indonesian film industry has been insignificant, both in terms of the number of films produced and the range of issues filmmakers have addressed in their work (Sen, 2006a: 96). Nevertheless, it is important to note that in the Reform era,



the production of film in Indonesia has increased substantially, and the industry has become much more open in portraying subversive and controversial issues, including the diversity of human sexuality. In this respect, the role of Indonesia's international film festivals has been significant. These festivals' inclusion of lesbian, gay and queer films from all over the world has encouraged young Indonesian filmmakers to explore the representation of homosexuality in contemporary Indonesian film.

At the same time as this development was taking place in the industry as a whole, the term "queer" was being introduced into Indonesian film discourse by the Queer community (Q-munity), a non-profit arts management company which was set up to present non-heteronormative representation to the cinema-going public. Founded in Jakarta in 2002 by a group of freelance journalists and arts enthusiasts who were mainly Chinese Indonesian gay-identified men, Q-Munity held an independent Q! Film Festival in Jakarta from 21 to 29 September 2002. The event screened 30 national and international films on gay and lesbian themes. John Badalu, the event director, stated that he wanted to show something different to the public, whatever the risk might be. He declared that the sole purpose of the festival was to promote films of quality, not to fight for public acceptance of homosexuality or to raise political issues by showing the movies (personal interview, 13 August 2007).

Badalu's statement indicates the way the organisers of the festival tried to circumvent any negative reaction from the public. Despite the absence of any legal ban on homosexuality under Indonesian law, films dealing with homosexuals themes were very controversial, and the success of the festival depended on an avoidance of interference from the authorities.

Three new local independent films were also shown. The first was Arya Kusumadewa's *Aku, Perempuan dan Lelaki Itu* (Me, Women, and That Man) which tells the story of a woman who comes to the conclusion that she does not need a man in her life. Second was a short film *Duniaku, Duniamu, Dunia Mereka* (My World, Your World, Their World) by Adi Nugroho Adisusilo featuring a monologue describing the secret life-story of a transvestite. The third film was a 12-minute short titled *Ternyata...!* (Apparently...!) by Azhar Lubis, which tells the story of a young woman who discovers that her boyfriend is *gay*. International films screened at the festival came from both Asian and European countries and included the British film *Priest* (1994) and a recent Chinese film by Stanley Kwan, *Lan Yu* (2001). Supported by the Goethe Institute and the Italian Institute in Jakarta, the five day free event also screened *Wilde, I Shot Andy Warhol* and *Torch Song Trilogy* (Anwar, 2002).

Without posters or other kinds of media advertisements, the first festival largely avoided any negative public reaction over homosexuality as a film theme. At this early stage, the usage of “queer” in the festival’s title did not attract much mass media and public interest. One fundamentalist Islamic organisation staged a blockade of one of the festival venues, but on the whole, the organisers managed to avoid drawing public attention to the event. Badalu stated that in order to circumvent censorship regulations, the festival committee relied on tapes being passed quietly from person to person (personal interview, 13 August 2007). Despite its low profile, the staging of the festival was a significant event, because at the time, discussion of homosexuality remained highly controversial in Indonesia.

At the second Q! Film Festival, held in Jakarta in October 2003, 53 films was screened. Significantly, the festival was attended by a number of gay filmmakers from outside Indonesia, including Paul Lee, a Canadian film director, and Imaizumi Koichi from Japan, the director of *Naughty Boys*. A report on this festival published in *Tempo* magazine made an attempt to define "queer" for its readers.

"Queer is as a translation of "eccentric" or "strange", a consequence of the democratisation proces. Queer is a celebration of an attitude from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual people that desire is complex, and its human dimensions and aesthetics are too immense to be conceptualised within a heterosexual framework." (*Tempo*, 12 October 2003: 72)<sup>1</sup>

This description of the term queer may well be the first definition of queer in the Indonesian mass media. In the same month, another national magazine, *Gatra*, reported a cross cultural gay marriage between an Indonesian gay man, Philip Iswardono, and his partner William Johannes, a Dutch journalist, in The Netherlands. This event was considered newsworthy, as it was the first public gay marriage involving an Indonesian, and *Gatra* issued a special edition on the controversy surrounding homosexuality from legal, cultural and religious perspectives. It also included a special article entitled *Queer* by Jaleswari Pramodhawardani, a feminist activist and scholar from LIPI (Indonesian Academy of Sciences), who described queer as "a complicated term which designates the opposite of those who are 'normal', not the opposite of those who are 'heterosexual'".

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<sup>1</sup> Queer adalah eksentrik dan aneh, merupakan gejala yang paling buntut dari konsekuensi demokrasi. Queer merupakan sebuah perayaan sikap kaum gay, lesbian, biseksual, transeksual, bahwa *desire* begitu kompleks, dan dimensi kemanusiaan plus estetikanya tidak terekspresi [kan] dalam horizon heteroseksual (*Tempo*, 12 October 2003: 72).

Pramodhawarni criticised the usage of the term on the grounds of its potential masculine bias and its dismissal of the existence of lesbians.<sup>1</sup> However, her article encouraged respect for sexual minorities as a part of a general recognition of basic human rights (*Gatra*, 4 October 2003: 38).

At the same time, the Q! Film Festival organised a queer photography expo entitled “Roman Homo(gen)” in Jakarta. Three openly Indonesian *lesbian* activists and photographers, Ade Kusumaningrum, Ayu Rai Laksmi and Imelda Taurina Mandala, participated in the exhibition. Their works described the difficulties experienced by women with same-sex desire in Indonesian hetero-patriarchal society. It is interesting to note how they “came out” to *Gatra* magazine and shared their personal experiences of survival as *lesbian* women in Indonesian society. John Badalu saw these events as an indication of the emergence of a new *gay* generation, who are more confident about coming out as adolescents compared to the earlier generation of Indonesian *gay* and *lesbian* activists, who only publicly proclaimed their sexual identity at the age of 30 or 40 (*Tempo*, 12 October 2003: 74).

Thus, it can be argued that the existence of the term queer in Indonesian society dates from the second Q! Film Festival in 2003, with the Queer community playing an important role in disseminating this new concept. It is worth noting also that the term produced a less negative reaction in Indonesia than *gay* or *lesbian*, when those terms first appeared in

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<sup>1</sup> “Dari sisi terminologi, kata queer sendiri agak bermasalah. Ia bukanlah tema yang netral. Secara umum, queer menunjuk pada lawan dari mereka yang “normal”, bukan lawan dari mereka yang “heteroseksual”. Karena itulah, pemakaian kata queer seringkali dikritik karena mengandung bias-bias maskulin yang menghapus keberadaan kaum lesbian” (*Gatra*, 4 October 2003: 38).

the Indonesian media. There are two possible reasons for the different reactions. Firstly, unlike the terms *gay* and *lesbian*, “queer” was not familiar in the Indonesian cultural context, and did not carry the negative connotations of the earlier terms. Ferdiansyah Thajib, from Q-Munity Jogjakarta, remarked (personal interview, 10 July 2007) that it was because “queer” was more playful and more neutral than *gay* and *lesbian* that he was confident enough to identify himself as a member of the queer community.

From that point of view, the perceived neutrality of “queer” makes it more appealing to people who are ambivalent about their sexual identity or who feel different from others. As Ferdiansyah commented, queer adopts the MTV spirit of “it’s normal to be different” (personal interview, 10 July 2007).<sup>1</sup> Secondly, there was a general public perception that queer was closely associated with popular culture, especially film, and not with social life in general. Its use was confined to the context of a film festival that was directed at a younger, middle class, and well-educated audience. The role of international organisations such as the Goethe Institute and the Italian Institute, and most importantly the support of the Berlin Film Festival, was also a crucial factor in making these festivals a success in Indonesia. In turn, the Berlin Film Festival has identified the queer film festival in Jakarta as the most successful example of a queer film festival in Asia (Hernandez, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> As these comments indicate, “queer” as an Indonesian term has acquired different connotations from those of queer in English. The Indonesian term denotes an accepting, and positive, attitude towards LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual) sexualities and identities. It serves as a framework for building a sense of solidarity among LGBT communities, and confronting negative public perceptions about all forms of non-normative sexuality. See also below (pp. 145-146) for comments on the political significance of the meaning “queer” has acquired in Indonesian.

In order to disseminate queer film for Indonesian audiences, some young Q! Film Festival committee members organised similar queer film festivals in other major cities in Indonesia, such as in Jogjakarta, Surabaya, Makassar and Medan. Q-Munity Jogjakarta, for instance, now has an annual program that involves not only hosting the Jogjakarta Queer Film Festival but also the creation of a queer-friendly community in the city. On its official site, Q-Munity Jogja describes its three main objectives: firstly, building up public awareness of the issues of sexual diversity and HIV/AIDS through films, art and discussions; secondly, strengthening the potential of marginalised communities in Jogjakarta by encouraging their active participation in the cultural life of the city; and lastly, advocating sexual diversity and tolerance by portraying the daily life of *gay* men, *lesbian*, bisexuals, transgender/transsexuals, as well as people living with HIV/AIDS (Q-Munity Jogja Website, 2007).

In 2006, Q-Munity held its fifth Q! Film Festival in Jakarta. This was an important occasion, because it was at this time that the festival officially became a part of the Teddy Award section of the Berlin Film Festival. Being acknowledged by one of the biggest international film festivals was a great achievement for Q-Munity, marking an important step in its attempt to guarantee the stability and continuity of the festival into the future. At the same time, the festival has also formed partnerships with other international queer festivals, such as Mix Brazil Film Festival and the Hamburg Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. However, legal issues and the heated debate surrounding the draft Anti Pornography (RUU-APP) bill in 2006 were also issues of concern for the community (Q-Film Festival Website, 2007). In an attempt to further the interests of the community in this climate, a discussion

on homosexual rights and the representation of homoeroticism in Indonesian films with audience participation was held in Jakarta on 7 September, 2006. Since then, the festival has been held regularly every year, with an increasing level of participation from the general public as well as the film community.

## **Conclusion**

The essential contribution of queer theory to studies of sexuality has been its resistance to normativity, whether this be the imposition of a binary and unequal opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality or the normative emphasis in gay and lesbian theory on politically and culturally progressive forms of homosexual identity. By emphasising the fluidity of identity, queer theory offers a more inclusive framework for talking about sexual orientations and sexual desire. This makes queer an effective site of resistance for those who position themselves outside normative categories of all kinds, and opens up new areas of investigation for cultural studies. By broadening the field of enquiry to include all expressions of resistance to sexual normativity, queer encourages new ways of theorising the relationship between behaviour and identity, performativity and essence.

Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the perceived gender neutrality of queer theory has created a tension between feminist and queer scholars. In the view of some feminists, queer theory potentially posits a monolithic male subject, thus damaging the interests of feminism. Moreover, as a new form of “Northern theory” produced by male, white, middle class academics in the West, queer has also been suspected of propagating European and North American knowledge which may damage the survival of local forms of

sexual expression in non-Western contexts. Outside the West, however, the term “queer”, and aspects of the understandings it embodies, have begun to take root in a wide range of local contexts, indicating that the concept is proving to be adaptable to non-Western cultures and communities. What is important is that these local, non-Western adaptations of queer must generate their own versions of “queer theory”, rather than being studied in terms of imported Western frameworks. As suggested in the above discussion, in Indonesia, this involves recognition of the way sexual and gendered identities overlap, making it impossible to keep sexual and gender categories separate from each other, as is usually the case in Western-derived forms of queer theory.

In Indonesia, as in Asia more broadly, a prime site for the localisation of the notion of queer has been locally produced cinema. The progress of queer film has been accompanied by a growing synthesis between filmmakers, queer communities and film audiences, raising the possibility that queer film may in time emerge as a focus for the development of queer communities in situations where same-sex behaviour often runs counter to state laws or social stigma. By portraying local understandings of non-normative sexualities in a widely-disseminated form of popular culture, queer film in countries like Indonesia has the potential to change popular perceptions of what is natural and permissible in the expression of sexuality and gender.

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